The Transnational Fantasy: The Case of James Cowan

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RECENT CRITICISM HAS SEEN THE RISE OF AN APPROACH TO literature that views texts as products of "transnationalism," a move that arises from a growing sense that, in a global age, authors should not be bounded by the traditional limits of national culture. In her book *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (2006), for instance, Rebecca Walkowitz looks at how this trend has evolved in world Anglophone literature, extending from canonical writers like Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf to such contemporary authors as Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, and W. G. Sebald. In the field of Australian literature, the question of transnationalism is often linked to issues of postcolonialism, as reflected in recent critical works like Graham Huggan's *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (2007) and Nathanael O'Reilly's edited collection *Postcolonial Issues in Australian Literature* (2010), both of which examine how Australian literature and culture have metamorphosed in the new global context. While there is little doubt that world literature has been affected in important ways by this broadening of the literary stage, there seems to be a widespread conflation between two similar but different terms: the transnational and the transcultural. For while it is true that the culture of many countries arises from a cosmopolitan and diverse assortment of influences, this loosening of cultural boundaries between nations is far from being simultaneous with the decline of the state.

The notion of escaping the logic of the state through the practice of transnationalism is an elaborate illusion that unravels when examined with a more critical eye, a fantasy that sits at the heart of the work of Australian author James Cowan. Despite the fact that Cowan has published more than twenty books, winning the Australian Literature Society's Gold Medal in 1998 for his most famous novel, *A Mapmaker's Dream* (1996), his work as a whole has received little critical attention in the broader context of Australian literature. Cowan's best-known writings are cosmopolitan in scope: *A Mapmaker's Dream*, for instance, is the fictional diary of Fra Mauro, a historical figure that Cowan plucks from the Renaissance to serve as a postmodern meditation on the advent of both colonialism and modernity, while *A Troubadour's Testament* (1998) relates the quest of a twentieth-century British academic to discover the secrets of the medieval French troubadour and poet Marcebru. In his most recent non-fiction works, similarly, Cowan has examined the lives of Saint Anthony and Saint Francis, while his latest offering, *A Spanner in the Works: Science and the Spiritual Life* (2007), looks at the way in which the development of technology has had a devastating effect on humanity's existential sense of itself. If one were to read the work of Cowan from *A Mapmaker's Dream* to the present, therefore, the overwhelming impression would be that he is a true cosmopolitan who seeks playfully to interweave history and meaning, private and public, fiction and non-fiction. In short, based on his work from the past fifteen years or so, combined with the knowledge that Cowan has spent much of his adult life wandering from one corner of the globe to another, the logical conclusion would be that Cowan, although he happened to be born in Australia, is a writer who has surpassed all national limitations in order to exemplify the practice of "transnational" literature.

TWO PHASES

From another perspective, however, Cowan's recent silence about Australia is rather unusual, because in the period before *A Mapmaker's Dream* Australia seemed to be very much at the forefront of his concerns. Cowan's writing career, in fact, could be divided into two phases that have shifted dramatically in terms of their object of study. Beginning in the early 1980s, when he first began to publish on a regular basis, Cowan's work was firmly centered on Australia. Books like *The Mountain Men* (1982) and *The River People* (1983) contemplated the impact of European settlement on the Australian landscape. This examination of his homeland intensified in the 1990s when Cowan focused his attention on indigenous culture, a prolific period from 1991 to 1995 in which he published several books on this topic. With the exception of *Mysteries of the Dreaming: The Spiritual Life of Australian Aborigines* (2001), Cowan has been strangely silent on this subject ever since, a change that leaves the reader to wonder about this shift in the focus of his work. Is it simply the result of his development as a writer, stemming from Cowan's feeling that it was time to explore his ideas in a new and different context? In other words, is this move toward a transnational approach to his writing a creative or a political decision? Certainly this question cannot be answered satisfactorily if it is considered purely from the perspective of Cowan's

personal motives, at which we can only guess. The only real critical avenue open to us is to examine this matter through the lens of Cowan's central concerns about human spirituality. This theme, after all, is the basis for Cowan's interest in indigenous culture, which he argues has maintained its ties to the more fulfilling spiritual values of the ancient world, providing a ray of hope in a world plunging into the darkness of modern nihilism.

Cowan's views have drawn heavy criticism from Mitchell Rolls, an expert on indigenous culture who teaches at the University of Tasmania. Rolls has published no less than three pieces attacking Cowan's work, the most decisive of which is "James Cowan and the White Quest for the Black Self" (2001), wherein Rolls engages in a thorough dismantling of Cowan's treatment of indigenous culture. Rolls argues that while Cowan, like many other non-indigenous authors, claims to stand against the horrors of colonialism, he is effectively continuing its practices by appropriating indigenous culture to his own ends. Cowan's portrayal of indigenous culture as the antidote to the poisons of Western modernity only serves to stifle that culture under the guise of sympathy. Aborigines, it is said, bear the cultural mechanisms and attributes that will enable reintegration of the alienated Western self, assist non-Indigenous Australians to overcome their alleged alienation from landscape, save the world from environmental catastrophe, bring spiritual fulfillment to those so questing, and solve a myriad of other Western crises, personal, social and cultural. (2) Rolls's article unfolds as a point-by-point refutation of the authorial positions that Cowan inhabits in his work. These criticisms show up the naïveté of Cowan's valorization of indigenous culture, especially when Rolls demonstrates the way in which the depoliticization of religious practices strips them of their value. Rolls argues forcefully that Cowan's approach to indigenous culture is ethically and politically untenable.

Although it is uncertain whether Cowan is aware of Rolls's critique, it is hard not to view his move toward the transnational as an attempt to insulate himself from these kinds of critical attacks. Despite the shift in subject matter, all of Cowan's writings follow a formula that remains unchanged across the two major phases of his career. Each of his books is a voyage or quest for meaning and insight, a journey that draws attention to a spiritual quality that has been lost or endangered by the nihilism of modernity. Cowan emphasizes that firsthand experience of a place is crucial to understanding the cultural phenomena he is studying. Such a strategy serves to imbue his texts with the authority of presence and, in true romantic style, he supplements these experiences by using his imagination to create an imagined dialogue with the vanished past. As Rolls points out, Cowan's books on indigenous Australian culture are riddled with ethical problems because of this approach, undermining their outer rhetoric of sympathy by surreptitiously replicating many of the same mechanisms of cultural appropriation as the old doctrines of colonialism. And yet this same approach, when applied to a subject imbued with less political emotion than the touchy subject of indigenous culture is seen as something positive, even celebratory. An excellent example is Cowan's *Francis: A Saint's Way* (2001), a personalized biography of the great Catholic saint Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan order. As in previous books, Cowan's strategy is to follow, quite literally, in the footsteps of his object of study, self-consciously comparing what he does in this book to his earlier experiences of indigenous culture. He writes in the introduction:

> My decision to study him [Francis] was made easier by the fact that I had chosen to live in Italy—and within easy reach of his beloved Umbria. Quite early in my stay I used to walk down to the monastery of Le Celle near Cortona to sit in the tiny chapel next to the cave where he had once slept. The monastery had an archaic feel about its buildings, as if the entire place had been hewn from the valley in which it is located. It reminded me of certain Aboriginal caves that I had visited in the Australian desert. (vii)

Cowan makes similar comparisons throughout the book, a tactic that provides a subtle affirmation of the idea that, despite the cultural differences between indigenous Australians and the Italian saint, the experience of genuine spirituality is a universal phenomenon. Cowan sets himself up as the bearer of this tradition, a figure who can reach across the centuries and learn from his predecessors.

A difference in reception exists, therefore, between the negative way in which this approach is received by critics like Rolls when talking about indigenous spirituality, and the sense of affirmation that comes from Cowan's admiration for the Catholic saint. Whatever Cowan's intentions, the shift in subject matter that marks the second phase of his career has certainly given his work much greater legitimacy than it possessed before. In his first phase it was not enough to experience indigenous culture firsthand—no matter what he did, his interactions with that culture could *only* be interpreted as an act of appropriation. By changing his focus to topics that cross national boundaries, by contrast, Cowan places himself in a more sympathetic position because readers can identify with his outsider's fascination with both the times and cultures he is exploring. It is thus perfectly acceptable for Cowan to speak with the voice of the Renaissance Italian friar Fra Mauro in *A Mapmaker's Dream*, or for the narrator to read his own spiritual journey into the life of the French poet Marcebru in *A Troubadour's Testament*—indeed, such historical appropriations are a staple of postmodern fiction. Similarly, the way in which Cowan reaches across religious boundaries to praise the legacy of Islamic culture, or draws inspiration from the lives of such Christian heroes as Saint Francis and Saint Anthony, together with Fra Mauro's admiration of the Jew of Rhodes in *A Mapmaker's Dream*, are understood by the typical reader as a praiseworthy indicator of Cowan's tolerance. Yet when he approaches indigenous Australian culture and religion using the same mindset, he opens himself to charges of colonialism and exploitation. There is an inconsistency of reception at work here that deserves closer examination.

It is puzzling that Rolls does not pursue his critique of Cowan's work beyond its first phase. Such an oversight is understandable at the time of Rolls's first paper in 2001, when the

transnational "turn" in Cowan's writings may not have been completely clear, but Rolls's two subsequent pieces "New Age: New Orthodoxy–The Institutional Authorizing of Balderdash" (2002) and "The Green Thumb of Oppression" (2007), do little more than repeat his initial charges without providing a critical update on Cowan's more recent work. While expressing concern about the effect of Cowan's growing reputation in the wake of *A Mapmaker's Dream*, Rolls otherwise ignores this shift toward the transnational, choosing instead to focus solely on the first phase of Cowan's work. It would surely be pertinent, for instance, to compare Fra Mauro's meditations on the fate of the Garamantes, an ancient North African tribe, and their resonance with colonial discourses about the "disappearance" of indigenous Australian culture. In *A Mapmaker's Dream*, the narrator is visited by a "teacher of rhetoric" who has just come from Libya, where he was studying what little remains of the Garamantes culture. The Garamantes, the teacher explains, did not possess a system of writing, and thus did not leave behind any documents, only ruins and graves. Furthermore, the teacher insists, they were "spiritual polygamists" whose culture was distorted and overwhelmed by being conquered, in turn, by the Egyptians, the Catharginians, and the Romans. These stories arouse the sympathy of Fra Mauro, who agrees that, while the Garamantes no longer inhabit the "Libyan hinterland now lying empty on my map," his project should nonetheless "include their absence" (98). With a romantic flourish, the teacher of rhetoric laments the fate of this people as indicative of that lost "innocence" the ancients once possessed, a state that moderns yearn to recreate for themselves:

> "The Garamantes reflect something inside us all," he replied. "That they are no longer with us does not mean we cannot enjoy what was an inherent innocence in their nature. Belief in the sun, wind, and the spirit of place confirms it, does it not? Nor could the Romans erase such a gift from the face of the earth, try as they might. It remains with us, even today. Hence the need for you to render it on your map for others to enjoy." (98)

This elegiac spirit bears a dangerous similarity to various colonial discourses in Australian history, from the legal claims of the earliest settlers that the land constituted a *terra nullius* ("empty land") to the later, more romantic view, exemplified in their most outwardly "benign" form in such works as Daisy Bates's *The Passing of the Aborigines* (1938) and Ernestine Hill's *The Great Australian Loneliness* (1940), which portrayed the indigenous peoples as noble savages, the last vestiges of a dying race so "pure" and "childlike" that they could not possibly adapt to the conditions of modernity.

So the question must be asked: why have critics taken Cowan to task for his portrayal of indigenous culture, and yet said nothing about his views of the Garamantes and other oppressed cultures in his later writings? In each of his texts, Cowan looks back to the spirituality of an earlier time, bemoans the fact that it has been lost in modernity, and searches for ways to revive its spark through his writings. The same impetus underlies Cowan's interest in indigenous Australian culture, which he sees as having maintained a link to its ancient spiritual forms in a way that the non-indigenous world has failed to do. For this reason, he argues, we must treasure and preserve it, so that indigenous Australian culture does not suffer the tragic fate of so many other spiritually vibrant cultures before it. The second phase of Cowan's career presents an implicit challenge to his earlier critics by emphasizing that the real object of his writing lies not in colonizing any particular cultural tradition, but in reviving the existential vitality of humanity as a whole. That he happened to explore this path initially through the prism of indigenous Australian culture is thus presented as being merely "circumstantial." The extension of Cowan's work into its transnational phase can thus be seen as a tactical move that seeks to defuse accusations of cultural bias by retreating into a relatively depoliticized realm.

This critical silence opens the question of whether contemporary criticism is capable of sustaining a viable critique of Cowan's work once it enters this second phase. Who, after all, would fault him for his fascination with the Cathars, the medieval heresy that was so brutally crushed by the Catholic church? Who would criticize him for incorporating the lives of such great figures of the early church as Saint Anthony and Saint Francis into his own spiritual journey? Who would condemn him for his affirmative commentaries on the great Sufi poet Rumi? Most importantly, who would take issue with his insistence on the spiritual and ethical bankruptcy of modern humanity? This aspect of his thought, after all, draws from a respected philosophical and literary tradition, a line of thought that Cowan uses as a touchstone throughout his work. That Cowan can be condemned for continuing the work of colonial oppression against indigenous Australian culture, but then lauded as a contemplative, open-minded spiritual seeker when he applies exactly the same approach to a transnational range of subjects, is a curious contradiction indeed.

Colonization Begins at Home

While postcolonial theory has rightly pointed out that cultures colonized during the imperial period are diverse and fragmented, it is all too often taken for granted that the colonizers of the Western world were (and are), by contrast, a fairly homogeneous group. One has to wonder at this state of affairs—how is it possible that the colonized world was composed of numerous languages, religious structures, and ethnic identifications, on the one hand, while the colonizing countries, such as Great Britain, France, Belgium, Holland, Spain, and Portugal were societies that had been unified by a single tradition on the other? In reality, of course, the cultural "unity" of these European countries is a fabrication, a useful fiction that suppresses the fact that colonization is not merely an international phenomenon, but a process that begins at "home." From the point of view of the postcolonial critic, of course, this complicates matters greatly, for once it becomes clear just how widespread the practice of colonization is it becomes impossible to posit a straightforward moral dichotomy between colonizer and colonized. After all, if the culture of the colonizer was itself subject-

ed to internal subordinations, it is not really accurate to speak of the British or the French or the Spanish without referring to them as "peoples" rather than as a single nation.

From a political point of view, it is not surprising that postcolonial theory has largely ignored or downplayed this internal mode of colonization. After all, the period of international decolonization following World War II was hardly a rejection of the state model, since large countries with diverse populations, such as India and Indonesia, have been particularly energetic in harnessing the power of nationalism to draw their constituents together as a single entity. Although such movements are formed in the name of unification, the reality is that this nationalist rhetoric is a form of internal colonization that often has deleterious effects on the diversity of the population. In the postcolonial world, this rhetoric has been translated into tangible forms of intolerance and tragedy in the past few decades. Such disasters are at the forefront of our minds because they are recent, but also because we have chosen to overlook the way in which these very same practices have provided the illusion of cultural homogeneity in the West, an earlier, internal phase of colonization that made the later imperial age possible.

One of the defining moments of this colonial prehistory provides the backdrop for Cowan's novel *A Troubadour's Testament*, which is narrated by a British academic who traces the journey of the medieval poet Marcebru through the French region of Languedoc. The occasion for this journey is the narrator's discovery of a "death roll," a document dedicated to the memory of Marcebru's lover Amedée de Jois, which the troubadour carried from town to town for people to inscribe their thoughts and memories about her passing. Central to the novel's context is the history of the Cathars, a religious sect that flourished in Languedoc during the medieval period. "This southern heresy caused shock waves throughout Christendom, for it suggested a freedom of thought inimical to the doctrines of the Church," explains Horace Winterton, one of the narrator's close friends (18). The perceived threat of Catharism derived, in part, from the fact that its origins stemmed from religious and cultural traditions that lay outside of Christianity. The narrator thus meditates on the fact that Marcebru had formed many of his beliefs when he "had journeyed to Spain in the hope of finding patronage at its courts. In spite of his dislike of Islam he had absorbed many of its ideas without knowing it [. . .] Arab theologians were saturated in Greek thought, and thus with Neoplatonism, which in turn had fueled the fires of the medieval mind" (52). Without idealizing the Cathar doctrine, Cowan nonetheless clearly admires many of the open-minded aspects of this movement. After all, Catharism was not only cosmopolitan in its roots, it also welcomed other cultures (even the Jews, for so long objects of persecution in Catholic Europe, were tolerated in Languedoc), and the Cathars' views on the unimportance of the material body led to an acceptance of both gender equality and homosexuality. The dark cloud that the narrator sees as continuing to hang over Languedoc centuries after the brutal suppression of the Cathars during the Albigensian Crusade (1209–1229) is an indicator of Cowan's opposition to political oppression, and a forceful reminder of his recurring arguments about the fragility of true belief. But the suppression of the Cathars was more than just an attempt to assert the doctrinal orthodoxy of the Catholic Church. It was a brutal political attack on an entire culture—its language, customs, and of course, its religion. The effect of the Crusade was not merely to realign the region with Catholic doctrine, but also to bring it tightly under the control of the northern French monarchy. The Albigensian Crusade against the Cathars was a key historical act of "domestic" colonialism in a Europe that, it is all too easy to forget, was (and is) divided into many different peoples and tribes. Many vestiges of these cultures remain, either as linguistic communities (such as those who speak Flemish in Belgium) or even as active separatist groups (like the Basques in Spain), but the move to homogenize them through the construction of the state is one of the great untold stories of postcolonial history.

One theorist who has attempted this task is the French anthropologist Pierre Clastres. Just as Cowan spent several years living amongst the indigenous peoples of Australia, Clastres studied the cultures of various South American tribes. In *Society Against the State* (1974), Clastres argues against the dominant view in political theory, which is that the State is the most sophisticated and elevated form of political organization, the logical conclusion of modernity. He draws instead from his observations of tribal culture to demonstrate the way in which power is organized and distributed in Stateless societies in order to avoid the despotism and alienation of centralized power. In his essay "Of Ethnocide," published in his final collection *The Archeology of Violence* (1980), Clastres reveals some startling insights into the history of imperialism. In this piece, Clastres looks at the history of the concept of genocide, a term that originated with the Nuremberg trials in 1946, and the later concept of ethnocide, which traces a similarly disturbing, colonial path. The basic difference between these two ideas, Clastres argues, is that where genocide wants to eliminate what it perceives to be alien to itself, ethnocide instead seeks to "correct" and integrate all opposition by assimilating it into its own image.

This ethnocidal logic underlies much of the European colonial adventure, and Clastres discusses briefly how it has manifested itself, for instance, in the missionary zeal of Christianity, which set out to "save" the colonized world from its sins in a supposedly altruistic gesture. The all-embracing claims of Christianity are surpassed, however, by the still broader reach of secular humanism, which aims to encompass all people by turning them into citizens of the State. "The Indianness of the Indian is suppressed in order to make him a Brazilian citizen," points out Clastres. "From its agents' perspective, consequently, ethnocide would not be an undertaking of destruction: it is, on the contrary, a necessary task, demanded by the humanism inscribed at the heart of western culture" (46). Even more startling, however, is Clastres's assertion that this colonial appropriation of other cultures is a historical outgrowth of the internal ethnocide that western culture has practiced against itself:

> But if the west is ethnocidal as the sun is luminous, then this fatalism makes the denunciation of crimes and the appeal to protect the victims useless and even absurd. Is it not, rather, because western civilization is ethnocidal

> *first within itself* that it can then be ethnocidal abroad, that is, against other cultural formations? [. . .] Ethnocidal violence, like the negation of difference, is clearly a part of the essence of the State in barbarous empires as well as in the civilized societies of the West: all state organizations are ethnocidal; ethnocide is the normal mode of existence of the State. There is thus a certain universality to ethnocide, in that it is the characteristic not only of a vague, indeterminate "white world," but of a whole ensemble of societies which are societies with a State. (47–49)

As an example, Clastres points to the way this process has operated in his homeland of France, which originally "was only Franchemanie and its king a pale lord of the Northern Loire" (48). Clastres cites the overthrow of the Cathars as the first critical move in the expansion of State power in France, describing it as "a case of pure ethnocide" in which "the culture of the South of France–religion, literature, poetry–was irreversibly condemned and the people of the Languedoc became loyal subjects of the King of France" (48). Over the centuries, power has continued to consolidate in the hands of the centralized State through such key events as the abolition of the provinces as a result of the French Revolution and the establishment of mandatory education and military service under the Third Republic. In the name of equality and social betterment, the French state has thus performed a series of ethnocidal moves that have irreversibly damaged and suppressed its regional cultures. It is this process of internal colonization that allows us today to speak of the French people and no longer of the French "peoples," an act of domestic ethnocide that is being replicated in states all around the globe.

Clastres's brilliant analysis overturns the idea that the notion of the state is tied to a European origin and shows instead that it is a mode of human organization that, for specific historical reasons, has gained worldwide hegemony in recent centuries thanks to the active state suppression of tribal culture. Clastres argues convincingly that the social structures of the South American tribes, particularly their understanding of war, were designed to ward off the tyranny of universal consolidation required for the establishment of the state. War thus served as a predominantly symbolic gesture rather than as an attempt to conquer other tribes, a conflictual barrier that ensured the separation of cultures. This pattern, Clastres argues, marks human society wherever it is divided along the tribal lines that once characterized the world. It is only with the rise of the nation state that ethnocide emerges as a means of securing the allegiance of people *across* traditional tribal and ethnic groups. The vehemence of these ethnocidal tendencies has varied in accordance with the perceived stability of the state, with genocide forming the most extreme response to this need to establish internal unity. The majority of modern states, however, have come to the pragmatic realization that cultural and linguistic differences do not necessarily threaten its existence, and it is in this space that we see the rise of cosmopolitanism and transcultural exchange.

The idea that this ability to reach across boundaries represents the weakening of the state and the advent of a transcultural world is, therefore, a naïve illusion. The state may permit a certain level of play within its boundaries, such as embracing multiple languages (Canada, Switzerland) and cultures (the melting pots of America and Australia), but it only allows these things to happen on the premise that its place as the ultimate arbiter of sovereignty remains unchallenged. As Clastres puts it: "[E]thnocidal practice–to abolish difference when it becomes opposition–ceases once the State's strength no longer runs any risk" (50). The state tolerates (and even encourages) this kind of heterogeneity as long as its own preeminence is not challenged. There is no question, therefore, that the advent of modern state politics places all who encounter it in a deeply ambivalent position. Exclusion from the state, after all, means being disenfranchised from the benefits and privileges that participating in the political process can bring. Yet the exclusion of indigenous peoples from the Australian state through the founding principle of *terra nullius* was clearly, at base, an ethnocidal move by the British colonists designed to establish a state logic in a land where the indigenous tribal structure was inherently hostile to such a totalizing system. The dilemma presented by the state is particularly visible in Clastres's earlier example of the "humanist" gesture of incorporating indigenous people as citizens into the state structure: "the Amazonian Indian suppressed as Other and reduced to the same as the Brazilian citizen" (47). When the Australian public voted in 1967 to give citizenship to the indigenous people–to recognize them, in other words, as coming under the power of the state–this decision was similarly lauded as the correction of a long injustice. While the inclusion of indigenous peoples as Australian citizens is, from a pragmatic point of view, politically necessary, that does not mean that we should take its accompanying, self-congratulatory rhetoric of justice at face value. After all, this event was only made possible by a long process of state-sanctioned ethnocide. Consistent with Clastres's arguments, the indigenous peoples were only allowed citizenship once they were perceived as no longer being a genuine threat to state power.

Given that one of the key ethnocidal strategies of the state, as Clastres contends, is the elimination of cultural barriers in the name of national unity, Cowan's strategy of trying to transcend the state by championing a universalized, "transnational" outlook gives him a dangerous resemblance to the enemy he is opposing. Cowan, in particular, is guilty of seeing cosmopolitanism as a way of escaping the grasp of the state, as though avoiding the question of politics were the same thing as overcoming it. His works are replete with characters who, having been influenced by a mixture of cultures, are held up as models to be imitated. The Jew of Rhodes in *A Mapmaker's Dream*, for example, seems to embody Cowan's ideal of the modern human:

> Separated from his origins as both a man and a Jew, he had discovered in his rootlessness how to inhabit a region of his own mind. He was the first man I had met who had chosen to redeem himself rather than allow another to do so for him. In this sense he was more than a Jew, since the longed-for appearance of the Messiah was not something he anticipated any longer. He had become his own instrument of renewal. Upon his shoulders lay the burden of

coping with his alienation in the eyes of the world. As Jew and exile this man seemed to have mastered those twin steeds of defeat and turned them into incomparable warhorses. (27)

Cowan's writings are full of these cultural outsiders who live in a state of metaphorical exile that supposedly permits them a more incisive and profound view of humanity. In this spirit, he praises the asceticism of Saint Francis, whose "poetry of dispossession" permitted him "to see the flaws in medieval society" (51). In *A Troubadour's Testament*, the narrator encounters a blind painter who says of Marcebru that such "men stood outside their time," to which the narrator replies that poetry "by its nature, condemns the poet to exile" (42). For Cowan, therefore, the authenticity of these characters comes from the fact that they occupy a liminal space in which they have been infected by such a deep passion for the Other that it draws them out of their original milieu. As such, they claim no fundamental attachments to an exclusive set of beliefs, and it is from perspective that Cowan sees them as being, in effect, "stateless."

By emphasizing only the features that he believes to be important, Cowan repeatedly remakes his objects of study in his own image. That is not to say that, across his works, Cowan does not display a vast and detailed *factual* knowledge of his subjects, from indigenous mythology to French poetry. His error lies less in his information about these matters than in his repeated failure to understand their significance within their proper historical contexts. Cowan subordinates his subjects to his own philosophical presuppositions, lacing them with themes and motives that derive from the turn of the twenty-first century and mistaking them for eternal ideas. Saint Francis, for instance, is *not* a Kierkegaardian knight of faith, looking to suspend the march of world history: such an idea is the product of nineteenth-century European philosophy, and as such is completely alien to the time in which Francis lived. Yet Cowan maps his own desires and values onto Francis's life, transforming him into a modern existentialist hero.

In a similar manner, *A Mapmaker's Dream* uses the postmodern literary convention of being a "found" document to contend that Fra Mauro's diary should be read as a "collaboration" between the past and the present. He writes in the novel's conclusion:

> I make no case for the veracity of Mauro's observations. They are his as much as they are mine. He and I have linked arms across time and, in a way, each of us has influenced the other. He has made me a part of his time as I have made him a part of mine. This, surely, must be the real significance of history: that it allows us the opportunity to reach back into the past, tinker with its images, and so transform it into our own. (151)

This idea of reaching back into history in order to touch the past is a hallmark of Cowan's work. Whether it is his encounters with indigenous Australian legends, or his replication of the travels of Saint Francis, or his narrator's quest in *A Troubadour's Testament*, the narrative process inevitably culminates with the speaker's imaginary identification with the subject at hand. Cowan claims that he "becomes," by turns, an indigenous man, Saint Francis, Marcebru, Fra Mauro, and so on, in the course of his writings, as though a mystical connection is established between them that intermingles their voices in the great human chorus of existence.

The fact remains, however, that avoiding the question of the political is not the same thing as overcoming it. Indeed, it is precisely Cowan's move toward a universal logic, regardless of whether it is made in the name of humanism or spirituality, that plays into the hands of the state. For what these forms of thought have in common is their totalizing insistence that nothing is allowed to fall outside the political framework it has created for itself. In the same way that Cowan sees spirituality as the common central concern of humanity, so too does the modern state demand that no human being should be excluded from citizenship. So while the last few decades have seen the rise of a new cultural cosmopolitanism, this phenomenon has been accompanied, at the same time, by a dramatic expansion of state sovereignty. The ability to live "outside" the state, whether through a hermit-like withdrawal from society or by inhabiting its interstices as a "transnational" citizen of the world is, in practical terms, little more than a fantasy of escape. The totalizing logic of the state presents us with a deeply unsatisfactory set of choices: to engage in the game of state politics in order to leverage some limited form of justice and power, or to follow Cowan's failed attempt to withdraw from politics altogether by insisting on the primacy of the spiritual. Neither of these actions, however, solves the larger question of how to overcome the logic of state sovereignty that lies at root of the ethnocidal behavior and spiritual alienation that Cowan is supposedly fighting against. Indeed, argues Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), a book devoted to identifying this very problem, we need to find an entirely new way of thinking about power, and until then "a political theory freed from the aporias of sovereignty remains unthinkable" (44). In the end, therefore, transnationalism is little more than a fantasy of escape, a quixotic illusion that it is possible to live outside the purview of the state. As Agamben asserts, it is only when political thought moves beyond a universal logic of sovereignty that a new paradigm will emerge—a task that lies not in the past, where Cowan seeks it, but somewhere in a future that is yet to be realized. ❑

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Ron Pretty

Waiting

The moment of stasis between the land mass
& the ocean at sunset when the breeze dies,
the leaves are still & black against the citrus sky
& cicadas find their voice. Their chorus ebbs
& swells with the fading of the light as bats begin
their casual quartering of the sky. Now the lights
come on: street lights & house lights & the light
of the first bright stars. No moon, but in the west
that same pale glow. It is an evening of stillness,
a calm sitting unstirred by need or passion, the two
who linger there to watch the fading of the day
can see the beauty of the coming of the night:
the afterglow of lights reflecting in the lake
recall the journey, foretell the journey yet to take.

RON PRETTY's seventh book of poems, *Postcards from the Centre*, was published in 2010. He has edited the literary journals *SCARP* and *Blue Dog: Australian Poetry*, and, until 2007, ran the Poetry Australia Foundation and was Director of Five Islands Press. In 2001 he received the NSW Premier's Special Prize for services to literature and in 2002 an AM for services to Australian literature.